

Memoirs of Cecil A. Wenner

I was the third child of the union between Joseph Emanuel Wenner and Virginia McClean, born on February 5th, 1922 on St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands. I had five siblings. My father passed away at age 5 and I was raised by my mother. My mother worked as a domestic and laundress to support our family. During the Great Depression, jobs were scarce, incomes were low, and upward mobility was constrained.

I attended the Abraham Lincoln Elementary School and Charlotte Amalie High School on St. Thomas until age 16. At that time, I left to help support my family. Between 1938 and 1940, I work at the Grand Hotel, the premier hotel on St. Thomas at the time, as a waiter and storeroom stock clerk. In 1941, I started working at Arundell Corporation constructing a submarine base and a naval air station on the island.

The U.S. Virgin Islands was purchased from Denmark in 1917 for strategic reasons. It was astride major shipping lanes to and from the Panama Canal and was blessed with a deep and well sheltered harbor. With the outbreak of WWII, the U.S. Navy expanded its presence in the territory and started to build base facilities. Construction jobs become readily available and I responded to one such vacancy notice.

At Arundell, I worked as an oiler for a diesel steam shovel. My mentor was William Kirkland, a southerner. He showed how to maintain, service, and operate the steam shovel. During that time I learned to drive trucks. During this time I gained confidence and through daily contact with military officials and mainland American contractors, decided to enlist in the Army after the construction contract ended.

The principal motivation for enlisting was to take advantage of new opportunities. I decided to enlist on June 13th, 1944 in response to the first call for Virgin Island volunteers. I took a series of medical examinations and aptitude tests during that day at an induction center manned by the 65th Infantry Division, comprised of Puerto Rican troops, located at the West Indies dock in Charlotte Amalie, the main city on St. Thomas. After I was sworn in I was not allowed to leave the induction camp facility to notify my mother and siblings. The officer told me that my mother would be informed by him at a later date. The next day, I shipped out for Fort Buchanan in Puerto Rico, forty miles to the west.

The first morning at Fort Buchanan I had a feeling of awakening. I heard a newspaper vendor hawking papers in both Spanish and English and felt that this was a beginning. It was the first time, I had ever left St. Thomas and I felt that the military was for me. At Fort Buchanan I completed basic training and earned a sharpshooter medal.

My mother was eventually informed that I had joined the service. She was surprised that I had joined but did not say much. At Christmas time 1944, I had a 10 day pass and I visited my family. They were very proud of me and liked my military uniform. During my time at Buchanan, I would send home letters and photographs. I earned \$80 a month and sent \$60 of my pay to my mother. She was

very happy for the financial support, since three of my siblings were still in school.

In Puerto Rico, I would get two day weekend passes from Friday afternoon to Sunday night. I would normally travel to various places on the island by bus to sightsee. At night I would stay at the YMCA in San Juan. The charge was \$2.50 per night and it included a breakfast. I enjoyed myself immensely in Puerto Rico and started to learn Spanish.

I was stationed in Puerto Rico for approximately six months and then was transferred to Camp Pluseau, twenty miles outside of New Orleans, Louisiana. In Louisiana, I received additional training in the operation of cranes, clamshell diggers, steam shovels, and forklifts. In New Orleans, I had my first encounter with racial segregation. On weekend passes, I had to ride in the rear of buses behind a sign marked for Coloreds Only. This was a shock for me coming from the Caribbean where societies are multiracial and tolerant. In the camp, there were two PXs, one for whites and one for blacks. Movies were also segregated on the base. Nonetheless, the segregation in the military was not as grating as the segregation outside. Our company of Virgin Islanders consisted of blacks, mulattos, and white French descendants. Our company was a rainbow of colors and the rigid segregation was unsettling. Many times the white French Virgin Islanders would sit in the rear of the bus with black Virgin Islanders. On the base, our company was very close and we stuck together. We found support in each other. The same happened with multiracial Puerto Rican companies.

In February of 1945, I was transferred to Oahu, Hawaii. We traveled by train from New Orleans to Seattle, Washington, and then by Liberty ship from Vancouver, British Columbia to Honolulu. I remember passing through Kansas City and seeing the Armour meatpacking plant, through Colorado, through Cheyenne, WY, and logging towns in Oregon. On the journey to the West Coast we only had two brief stops. At one we visited the dam on the Colorado River. I was amazed by the scale of the construction.

When we left the Northwest, the trip to Hawaii took 30 days because we followed a zigzag course. Every morning I was encouraged to look out at sea and see a destroyer escort. During the course of the day, the destroyer would disappear over the horizon.

At 7 am on one morning we made landfall and I was struck by the red hills of Oahu. Once in Honolulu, we had a brief orientation and went to work as a dock side crane operator, unloading and loading cargo from and to ships. Up until the end of the war, the work pace was intense and there was little or no time for sightseeing. During the free time we had, we would play cards and go to movies. Once a month, the military sponsored a show with live entertainers. I did not even get to see Pearl Harbor.

On August 6, 1945, the day the first atomic bomb was dropped I remembered that we had gathered around in the tent of a company mate listening to a radio. I was both saddened and relieved to hear the news. The high civilian casualty rate saddened me deeply but I knew that the war was at an end and

that I would not go to the front. We recently had received survival training and new heavier clothes more appropriate for a colder climate. We all expected to join in the invasion of Japan.

After the war ended in the September 1945, the pace at the docks slowed considerably. We celebrated the end of the war on base but did not receive passes to go to town. Because of a large Japanese descent population in Hawaii, the military was concerned about potential disturbances. During my free time I pursued self-improvement vocational courses and learned how to type. I enjoyed and relished the opportunities the military afforded me to advance my education. On weekends I would go to Waikiki Beach to swim and once took a tour of pineapple fields and a high mountain pass. I was truly impressed expanse of pineapple fields and the striking physical beauty of Oahu.

In the spring of 1946, I wanted to reenlist but decided not to because I could not be guaranteed a transfer to a mainland American port company that was going to the Philippines. My company was predominately comprised of Virgin Islands but we were “officially” based in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Army Command wanted all companies from Puerto Rico to return because there had been language problems with predominantly Puerto Rico companies. Puerto Ricans first language was Spanish and many did not have good command of English which at times created communication problems with mainland Americans. Our native English speaking company was caught in a bureaucratic bind.

On the way back we passed through the Panama Canal and I was impressed by the locks. We arrived in Puerto Rico in March and spent about a month preparing for civilian life. We received counseling and spent most of the time playing cards, domino, and pool. On April 29, 1946, I left the service. We were met at the docks in St. Thomas by a large crowd celebrating our return.

I returned to civilian life and started to work at the electrical generation plant at the naval base on St. Thomas and returned to night school to complete 12th grade requirements and received a my high school diploma in 1952.

After I earned my diploma, I took business administration and accounting courses with an Extension Center of the Catholic University of Puerto Rico operated by the Roman Catholic Church in St. Thomas.

In 1953, I got married and started a family. I worked as an accountant for the territorial government of the Virgin Islands for twenty-six years. In the 1960's I took numerous courses at the newly created College of the Virgin Islands. I worked for the Departments of Finance and Public Works until 1979. I then retired and started a livestock farm (cattle, sheep, and goats). I continue in this activity to this day.

Besides hobby farming, I have remained active in the American Legion and in the Knights of Columbus, a lay group affiliated with the Roman Catholic Church, earning a 4th degree, the highest rank. I frequently attend the funerals of fellow veterans and participate in 4th of July parades with the American Legion.